

CREATURES OF THE BENEATH WORLD: HOPEWELL EFFIGIES FROM TURNER MOUND

Part I - The Horned Serpent Monster Effigy

by

Michael Rusnak

4642 Friar Rd., Stow, Ohio 44224

michael.rusnak@gmail.com

At one time or another, I would imagine any student of Ohio archaeology has become fascinated with a particular artifact. This report basically is about that—it is a discussion of my own fascination with and curiosity over an unusual effigy pictured in Charles Willoughby's 1922 book *Turner Mound Group of Earthworks Hamilton County, Ohio*. This curious effigy is depicted in Willoughby's book as a line drawing (Figure 1) and also in a photograph along with a second unique effigy (Figure 2).

Figures 3 through 6 are photographs of the same effigy taken in August 2008 at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. Figure 7 is an additional view from the Museum's catalog.

From the photographs of this restored object, it should be easy to understand the fascination. The creature depicted embodies many fearsome aspects from different animals—four horns, a viper-shaped head, a thick body, and a rattlesnake tail. Taken as a “sum of parts,” its appearance conveys a sense of something both bold and powerful. Perhaps it was something to be feared; something that likely existed in legends and folklore.

In short, the effigy suggests a story—or perhaps many stories. It may have been a being that was immediately recognizable to people of this prehistoric culture, or a powerful creature in their belief system, or even part of a larger mythology. Looking at this enigmatic form, the effigy presents some obvious questions: “What in the world was that thing?” “What stories might it be a part of?” and “What could it convey about the Hopewell Culture?”

This report includes a discussion of the effigy itself, a comparison with similar artifacts from Turner and elsewhere, and some observations by two biologists on what animal traits might be represented. In addition, it offers notes from some fascinating scholarship about the beliefs of precontact Native American cultures, including the Ohio Hopewell. Lastly, there is a look at one relevant story from Native American oral tradition that might hint at the effigy's character and meaning, while at the same time putting the homed monster in the context of this rich and complex cultural tradition.

The Turner Earthworks

The Turner Works were located in Hamilton County, Ohio, and were excavated mostly by Frederick Ward Putnam, Charles Metz and M. H. Saville between 1882 and 1891. Charles Whittlesey's 1850 survey drawing, showing the layout of the earthworks is in Figure 8. D.S. and J.A. Hosbrook's 1887 survey drawing is in Figure 9.

The homed monster effigy was unearthed in fragments from Mound 4 of the Turner Group (figures 10 and 11). Two other curious effigies—a similarly sized “water monster” and a smaller mixed fish and snake effigy—were also found in this same mound and will be discussed and pictured in a later article in *Ohio Archaeologist*. The three artifacts along with other artifacts excavated at the Turner Group are held in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. Many of the artifacts from Turner, including the famous mica snake which was also excavated from mound 4, can be seen on the Peabody's Online Catalog at <http://www.peabody.harvard.edu>.

The homed monster effigy was assembled from fragments, and from the photographs it is apparent that it has had some additional restoration. Overall, the piece measures 25.5 cm (about 10.25 inches) in length, 7.6 cm (about 3 inches) in width, and 5.8 cm (2.25 inches) in height, according to the museum notes. It has a hollow cavity on the underside that runs the length of the mid-section of the animal's body (about 5 inches). Willoughby notes that it was made of “red slate,” but according to the museum notes, the material may be petrified wood. Additionally, the artifact has a hollow cavity on the underside that runs the length of the mid-section of the animal's body (about 5 inches), and Willoughby notes that it was made of “red slate.” In the Turner Group report, Willoughby describes the object as:

A remarkable effigy of a serpent-monster, part horned serpent and part quadruped, beautifully carved in red slate... This was broken into many pieces, most of which were recovered. The head and tail are those of the horned serpent. The latter has the usual rattles. On the head, above and below, appear the typical reptilian plates. Two of the horns are carved in relief, and two are made separately, being inserted in holes drilled at the sides. Drilled holes also form the eye sockets, into which were doubtless inserted pearls ... (p.70)

Figure 12, from the Peabody catalog, shows three black and white views from an early glass plate image of the horned monster as it was assembled from pieces. Similarly, a black line drawing from Willoughby's article “Ancient Art of Ohio” in Figure 13 allows a comparison with the recent photographs and gives an idea of the extent of restoration.

Similarly Shaped Objects

In a 1916 article entitled “Ancient Art of Ohio,” Willoughby includes the horned mon-

ster with a group of similar artifacts which he calls “hollow effigies.” Among this group are several other elaborately carved figures. Figure 14 shows an illustration from Willoughby's article of “hollow effigies” from Ohio and neighboring states. In some examples, the animal being depicted is apparent, as is the case with the beaver and the bird of prey. Others, such as “the beetle,” are more abstract. In the Turner Group report of 1922, he again classifies the horned monster and the other large effigy found there to be part of this “group of hollow objects”:

The two effigies belong to a group of hollow objects from the mounds, the use of which is unknown. They are usually made of choice varieties of stone, but sometimes of antler or other material. They are carved into many shapes, but the more elaborate example are representations of the upper portion of a bird or quadruped or the head of some animal. One specimen in the Museum collection is in the form of a large beetle. All of them have a cavity upon the underside, and seem to have been fitted over some object. Some have perforations through the top, evidently for attachment. (p.71)

Additionally, the effigy's overall outline and its hollow underside make it an obvious comparison to boatstones, sometimes found on Woodland sites in Ohio. Copper boats and copper cones were also found at Turner. Several are pictured in Willoughby's Turner Group report —Figures 15 - 17.

In comparison to similarly shaped boatstones, the effigy is a much larger artifact. In *Ohio Slate Types*, Robert Converse notes that boatstones, which are often made out of banded slate, measure 4 inches or less in length. As noted above, the effigy is considerably larger (10.5 inches in length) than the typical four inch boatstone. While photographing the horned monster, its larger size compared to boat stones—and other effigies—was noteworthy. This relatively large size of horned monster may suggest something of its importance and power.

The fact that the horned effigy, as well as the other large effigies found at Turner, was deliberately created with a large hollow underside also suggests another interesting role that the object played for its creators. The hollow spaces in some of the copper boats and copper cones from Turner were filled with pebbles, conceivably because there was a bottom covering of wood or hide, creating a kind of rattle. As they are similarly shaped, the large effigies could also have been filled with pebbles and shaken to make rattling sounds. With such a noise, and

with its rattle-shaped tail, perhaps the effigy played a part in some drama or ceremony—the Hopewell equivalent of a passion play.

Biological Observations

As Native American cultures such as the Hopewell were living close to nature, they were likely keen observers of animals. Bearing that in mind, a better idea of specifically what animals are depicted in this effigy (and the other two effigies) is an important part of understanding more fully the role played by the objects.

Therefore, I asked Paul Mohan and Wendy Buck of the Akron Zoological Park to look at the photographs of the three effigies, and note what animals might be depicted. Because the Akron Zoo has an extensive collection of North American animals, these two biologists handle such animals daily, and might be able to recognize details depicted in the effigies.

In the homed monster, they pointed to obvious reptilian features—the scale marked head was snakelike on the top and under side, along with the rattle tail. They pointed out that the short stubby legs were much like those of several aquatic animals, including a river otter. However, both believed that they greatly resembled the legs of a snapping turtle. In addition, they noted that the creature had an overall outline resembling a snapping turtle in the large midsection of its body, the legs and to some extent in the triangular shape of its head. Lastly, the horns on the top of the head were buffalo or bovine-like.

In the book *Shamans of the Lost World*, William F. Romain points out that head scales of two snakes commonly found in southern Ohio—the copperhead and the black rat snake have a close resemblance to the pattern on the head of the Turner horned monster. He also comments that by contrast to other snakes, the large size of the rat snake and the poisonous bite of the copperhead would have made them “of potential interest to the Hopewell.” (pp. 82-83)

In any event, the animal qualities depicted in the effigy convey one a strong, powerful creature—four horns instead of two—and a nasty bite. It was also something that had a connection to water, and certainly a beast to be respected.

Hopewell Cosmos

Much of the literature that includes information about the horned effigy deals with the way the Hopewell and related cultures viewed and understood the cosmos. In this context, what the effigy might mean is better understood.

By studying common icons, imagery and oral traditions, scholars have put together an outline of the belief system of several Native American cultures. Sources describe this view of the world and what surrounds it as having three main tiers or a series of layers.

One tier is this place where people, trees, plants and many animals walk—the layer from horizon to horizon. Then, there is an above layer, the place of the sky full of light

and stars into which the birds can venture. Also, there is also a layer or tier beneath us. It is a beneath realm, one which can be entered by lakes, rivers, and waterways. This beneath realm is a world that is inhabited by creatures of the waters.

In an article titled “Some Cosmological Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” George Lankford explains this view of the cosmos and comments on how it existed in many cultures:

The paramount agreement in cosmology is that the cosmos is organized in layers. The Above World is the world of the air, but it is comprised of one or more solid vaults on which beings live. The above World is thus a celestial realm which is layered in itself. The Beneath World is composed primarily of water, although the logic of the Earth Diver myth indicates that the water resides in something solid, for at the bottom lies some soil. The Beneath World, like the Above World, may also consist of several layers, as elaborated by the particular society. In the middle of the two worlds is the Middle world, the earth-disk on which live humans, plants and other creatures. On this basic structural vision, there is massive agreement. How this is elaborated, though is a matter of local and regional tradition. (p. 15)

Additionally, Lankford argues that the fact that the view appears over such a wide geographic area, is testimony to its antiquity.

In another explanation of the cosmos, William F. Romain explains this layered, and relates how each realm is populated with creatures:

The cosmos is often thought of as having three basic levels - i.e., Upperworld, earth, and Lowerworld. These three levels are vertically connected by an *axis mundi*. In Native American cosmology, the Upperworld is the realm of the sky, sun, and stars, as well as powerful celestial birds known as Thunderbirds. By contrast, the Lowerworld is a watery world, located opposite to the Upperworld. It is the realm of fishes, frogs, snakes, and related creatures. Chief of the Lowerworld creatures is either the Great Horned Serpent or Underwater Panther.

The Horned Serpent

The figure of the horned serpent in Native American stories is well known. Horned serpents appear in the art in many areas of North America, such as in Petroglyphs Provincial Park in Ontario, as well as rock art in Utah, and in pottery designs from Moundville (Figure 18H), for example. Additionally, there is the famous mica snake from Turner, for which Willoughby suggests a connection to the horned serpents a connection with a horned serpent of Mexico.

In the Turner Group report, Willoughby connects the effigy with the oral tradition of Historic cultures. He comments that the

horned monster effigy might be a “mythical being,” and be related to those present in the oral traditions of historic cultures. He comments that

The effigy probably represents the water-monster or serpent-dragon, a mythical being of the Kiowa and other northern tribes, which is referred to by James Mooney as the “water-monster formed like a horned alligator.” (p. 70)

In his 1916 article “Art of Ohio,” referring to the effigy, he also notes:

This probably represents a mythical water monster analogous to those occurring in the mythology of the Pawnee and other tribes. The tail and head of a serpent, four horns characteristic of the serpent deity north of Mexico are present. (p. 498)

Many Native American cultures include a figure of The Great Serpent in their stories. The Great Serpent is sometimes pictured with horns and also wings and is associated with the beneath world; it is a powerful and important figure. In *Ancient Objects, Sacred Realms*, Lankford comments that “One of the more striking images from the iconographic collection known as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex is the winged serpent,” and that “The image takes several forms, but the U-shaped serpent with horns and peculiar wings was apparently particularly important at Moundville,” where there it was the most numerous design with thirty-three examples. (p. 107)

Interestingly, Lankford believes that the horned serpent and the water panther may be a single figure. He charts stories that contain the figure of a powerful beneath world creature in many Native American cultures (Figure 19). In some, it is a great horned serpent, and in others, it is a water panther. By cataloging Native American cultures whose stories include the horned serpent or water panther as part of their tradition, Lankford builds a case for a common—and ancient—origin of the figure. He explains

To the eyes of an outsider, the many references to water panthers, horned water serpents, and feathered snakes appear to point to a multiplicity of imaginative figures. When the evidence is brought together, however, it becomes clear that a single—well known figure is the reference. (p. 135)

Further, he points to an ancient origin because the figure is so widely spread:

The fact that people of different ritual organization, different languages, different social and economic structure, appear to have known the Great Serpent, by whatever name, argues for a wide spread religious pattern more powerful than the tendency toward cultural diversity. (p. 135)

In short, the great horned serpent is likely ancient enough to reach back into Hopewell times. While oral traditions can be unreliable,

basic concepts often remain. To better understand the reasoning behind Lankford's investigation, it may help to make a comparison to the study of language families. Like stories, languages themselves are a kind of oral tradition. By finding many common traits, linguists can easily group closely related languages according to their common origin. Italian, Spanish, and French, for example, all have Latin as their common origin, going back a few thousand years. However, because linguists are also able to show commonalities among language families that are much more distant geographically and that differ more in sound, such as between Latin-based languages and Germanic or Russian-based ones, they point to a common origin that is more ancient. Further still, while pronunciations and meaning can shift, many basic words exhibit shared traits even among languages as dissimilar—and as geographically distant—as Latin and Sanskrit. This suggests a common origin far back into antiquity.

In the same way, Lankford argues that tracing similar qualities in the stories of various Native American cultures from a wide geographic area suggest a common and ancient source. Moreover, he also implies that then that this powerful creature—whether depicted as a horned serpent or a water panther—was part of a basic and common belief, as well as a quite ancient one. It is certainly a figure old enough to be present in Hopewell times or even earlier.

The Uktena

Willoughby suggested that the horned monster effigy may be related to monsters in from the oral tradition of Historic cultures. It is enlightening to read some stories about one of these powerful creatures—especially in the context of this layered view of the cosmos, and the powerful Horned Serpent of the beneath world. Charles Hudson—and also Christopher Carr—suggest a curious candidate from Cherokee stories for comparison to the horned monster effigy—a horned serpent creature called the “Uktena.”

Hudson writes that “this world was sometimes frequented by Under World monsters who came out of the rivers, lakes, waterfalls, and mountain caves, all of these being entrances to the Under World” and that “the most horrible of all was the monster the Cherokees called Uktena, a creature combining features of all three categories of normal animals.” (p. 130-132)

The well-known anthropologist James Mooney, who recorded many Cherokee stories in the late 1800's & early 1900's before they were lost, noted a detailed description of the “Uktena.” It is curious to note how many details in the photographs of the Turner horned effigy closely resemble Mooney's physical description of the Uktena. One particular detail, the carved diamond-shaped scale patterns on the center of the head of the effigy, highlights the similarities in the description:

Those who know say the Uktena is a great snake, as large around as a tree trunk, with horns on its head, and a bright blazing crest like a diamond on

its forehead, and wales glowing like sparks of fire. It has rings or spots of color along its whole length, and can not be wounded except by shooting in the seventh spot from the head, because under this spot are its heart and its life. The blazing diamond is called Ulunsuti — “Transparent” — and he who can win it may become the greatest wonder worker of the tribe. (p. XXX)

Additionally, more of the creature's power is conveyed in the descriptions of its breath and even the mere sight of it:

As if this were not enough, the breath of the Uktena is so pestilential, that no living creature can survive should they inhale the tiniest bit of the foul air expelled by the Uktena. Even to see the Uktena asleep is death, not to the hunter himself, but to his family.

One Story

It is indeed tantalizing to read at least one of these wonderful stories out of the oral tradition, and at the same time keep in mind the appearance of the horned monster effigy from Turner. It is a powerful creature, and, as described in Mooney, one that is dangerous to people.

This particular story is not unlike some tales from King Arthur's knights. It is about a man condemned to death, a war captive named *Aganunitsi*, who promises to do an impossible deed in exchange for his life—he vows to confront the Uktena, and bring back a piece of the Uktena's horn. Thus the story begins:

In one of their battles, the Cherokee captured a great medicine-man whose name was *Aganunitsi*, 'the ground hogs mother' they had tied him ready for the torture when he begged for his life and engaged that if spared, to find for them the great wonder worker, the *Ulunsuti*. Now the *Ulunsuti* is like a blazing star set in the forehead of the great Uktena serpent, and the medicine-man who could possess it might do marvelous things, but everyone knew this could not be, because it was certain death to meet Uktena. They warned him of all this, but he only answered that his medicine was strong and he was not afraid. So they gave him his life on that condition, and he began the search.

On the medicine man's quest, he finds a giant green snake, then a black snake, and a giant frog. He also comes across monstrous reptiles at an enchanted lake, then turtles and giant sun perches in a deep pool, but he said they were not what he sought. Finally, he finds the monster he is seeking:

Other places he tried, going always southward, and at last on Gahuti mountain he found the Uktena asleep. Turning with out noise, he ran swiftly down the mountain side as far as he could go with one long breath, nearly to the bottom of the slope. There he stopped and piled up a great circle of pine cones, and inside of it he dug a deep trench.

Then he set fire to the cones and came back up the mountain.”

And at last he confronts the creature:

The Uktena was still asleep, and putting an arrow to his bow, *Ananunitsi* shot and sent the arrow through its heart, which was under the seventh spot from the serpent's head. The great snake raised its head, with the diamond in front flashing fire, and came straight at his enemy, but the magician turning quickly, ran at full speed down the mountain, cleared the circle of fire and the trench in one bound and lay down on the ground inside. The Uktena tried to follow, but the arrow was through his heart. And in another moment he rolled over in his death struggle, spitting poison all over the mountain side. But poison drops could not pass the circle of fire, but only hissed and sputtered in the blaze and the magician on the inside was untouched except by one small drop which struck upon his head as he lay close to the ground; but he did not know it. The blood too, as poisonous as froth poured from the Uktena's wound and down the slope in a dark stream, but it ran into the trench and left him unharmed. The dying monster rolled over and over down the mountain, breaking down large trees in its path until it reached the bottom... After seven days he went by night to the spot. The body and the bones of the snake were gone, all eaten by the birds, but he saw a bright light shining in the darkness, and going over to it he found resting on a low hanging branch, where a raven had dropped it, the diamond from the head of the Uktena. He wrapped it up carefully and took it with him, and from that time he became the greatest medicine-man in the whole tribe.

This little story suggests something of how the horned serpent might have been viewed in the mythology—as something powerful, something magical, something to be feared and respected. In short, it was not depicted with a powerful body, a rattle tale and sharp horns for nothing.

Conclusions:

Fresh photographs of this unique and impressive horned monster effigy hint at the apparent richness of Ohio's ancient cultures. Its mixed animal appearance not only suggests something a story, but its significantly larger size compared to boatstones implies importance. Like the copper boats also found at Turner, the hollow underside of the object may have been filled with pebbles, and perhaps it was carved as such to make a rattling noise. The biological details reinforce that the effigy was a creature at home in the water. And in the context of the Native American cosmos, the horned monster was likely a creature of the beneath realm. Indeed, the horned monster to be one of several items found at Turner that, as Romaine says “give a glimpse into the Hopewell lower world.” (Shamans, p. 82).

The effigy may also have been a form of the great serpent figure, which by its presence in many cultures was an important and powerful figure—and ancient enough to go back into Hopewell times.

Descriptions of monsters, such as the Uktena, in Cherokee stories present a remarkable resemblance to the horned monster effigy from Turner. The effigy may have had a powerful character like that of the Uktena, or at the very least, it likely represented a creature of the beneath world, something that bites, something powerful and something to be respected. Moreover, it gives a glimpse at how the Hopewell may have viewed the world, and what magical stories they might have told.

Two other unusual effigies—and likely creatures of the beneath realm—found at Turner were also part of this study as it was reported at the ASO Symposium in May 2010. Due to the space limitations, photographs and a brief discussion of two other effigies will be presented in a future issue of *Ohio Archaeologist*.

Photographs are courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 82-35-10/29685. On behalf of the Archaeological Society of Ohio, I want to thank the Peabody Museum and the President and Fellows of Harvard College for the opportunity to examine and photograph this unique artifact.

References

Christopher Caff and D. Troy Case, *The Scioto Hopewell and Their Neighbors: Bioarchaeological Documentation and Cultural Understanding*, Springer Science and Business Media, LLC 2008.

Robert N. Converse, *Ohio Slate Types*, Archaeological Society of Ohio, 1978

Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976

Charles Hudson, *Elements of Southeastern Indian Religion*, E. J. Brill, 1984

George E. Lankford, "Some Cosmological Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex" *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* / edited by F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber; foreword by Vincas P. Steponaitis. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007

George E Lankford, "The Great Serpent in Eastern North America," *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* / edited by F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber; foreword by Vincas P. Steponaitis. University of Texas Press, 2007

James Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formula of the Cherokees*, Asheville, North Carolina: Bright Mountain Books, 1992

Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Online Catalog
<http://www.peabody.harvard.edu>.

William F. Romain, *Shamans of the Lost World: a Cognitive Approach to the Prehistoric Religion of the Ohio Hopewell*, Alta Maria Press, 2009

William F. Romain, "Newark Earthwork Cosmology: This Island Earth," *The Newsletter of Hopewell Archeology in the Ohio River Valley* Volume 6, Number 2, March 2005

Charles C Willoughby., *The Turner Mound Group of Earthworks Hamilton County, Ohio*, Cambridge MA: Peabody Museum at Harvard University, 1922

Charles C. Willoughby, *The Art of the Great Earthwork Builders of Ohio*, Annual Report to the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, 1916, pp. 489- 500.

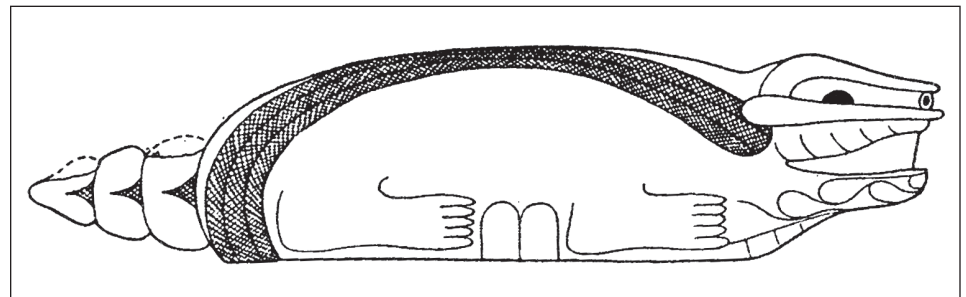


Figure 1 (Rusnak) Black and white drawing of effigy as pictured in Willoughby.

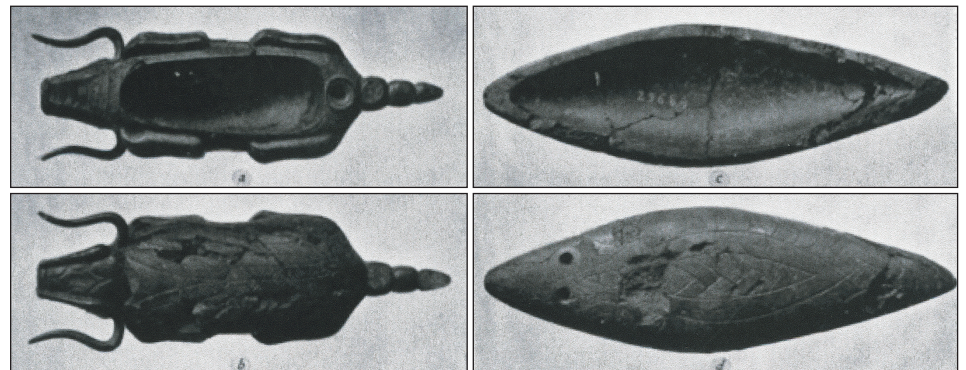


Figure 2 (Rusnak) Photographs of two effigies in Willoughby's Turner report.



Figure 3 (Rusnak) Peabody Museum photograph of Horned Serpent effigy.



Figure 4 (Rusnak) Underside of Horned Serpent Effigy.

Top and hollow underside of carved effigy. Copyright President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 82-35-10/29685.



Figure 5 (Rusnak) Tail on serpent effigy.

Figure 6 (Rusnak) Double horned head of effigy.

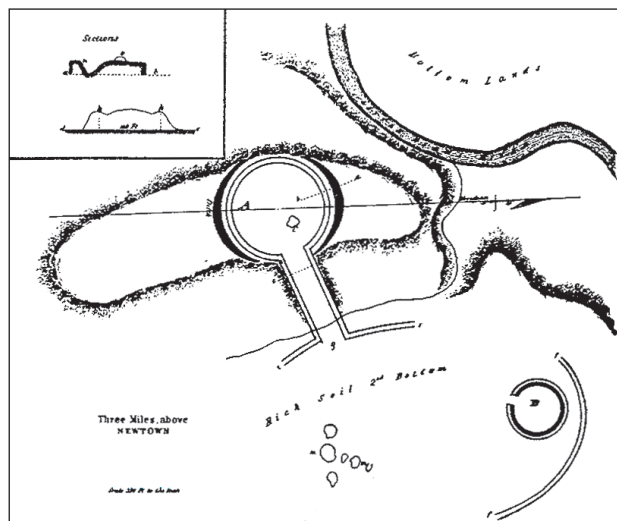
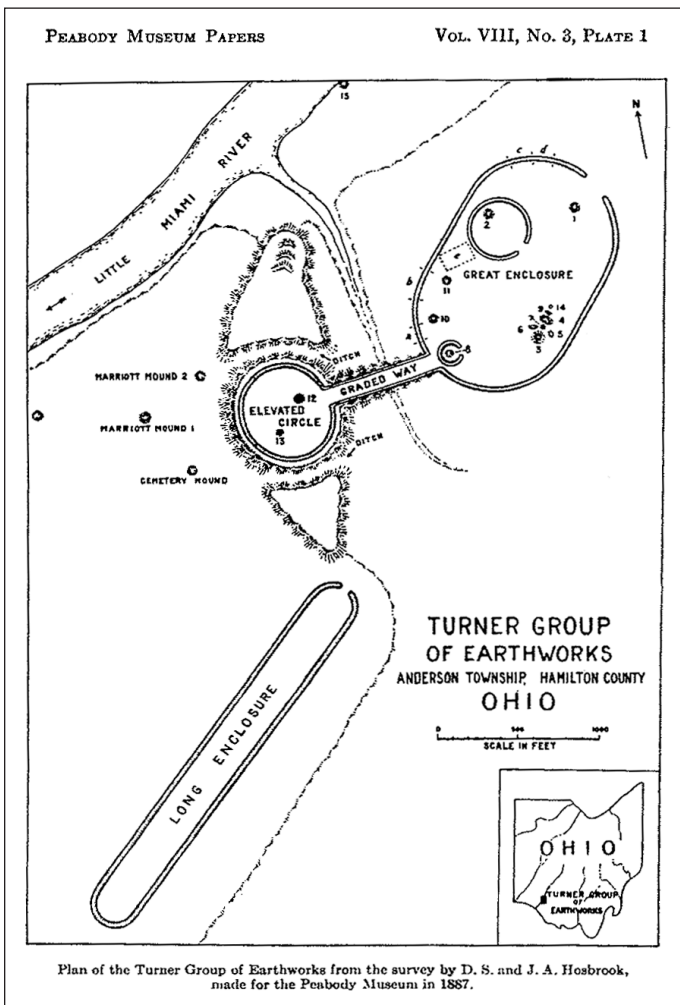


Two detail views of the carved effigy. Copyright President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 82-35-10/29685.

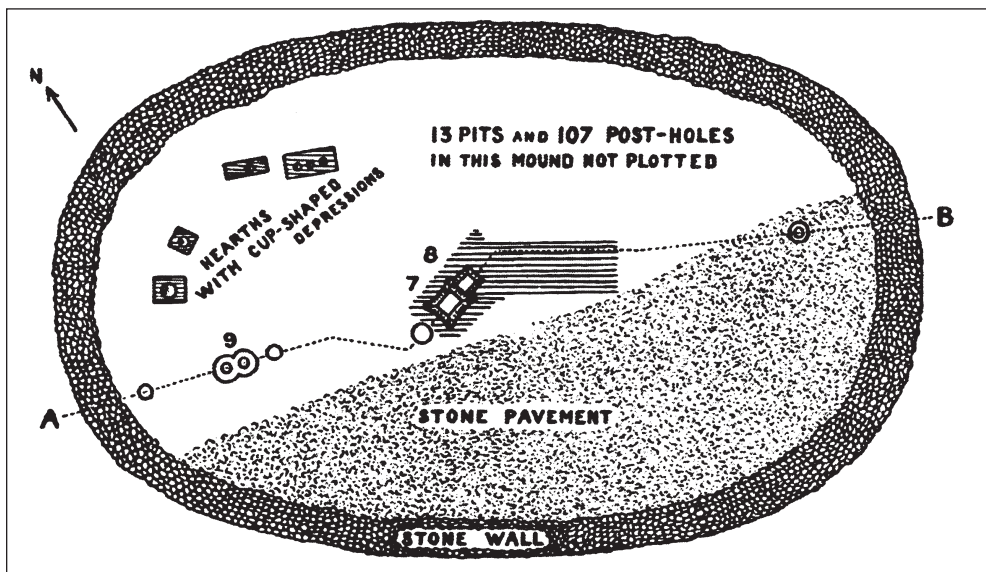
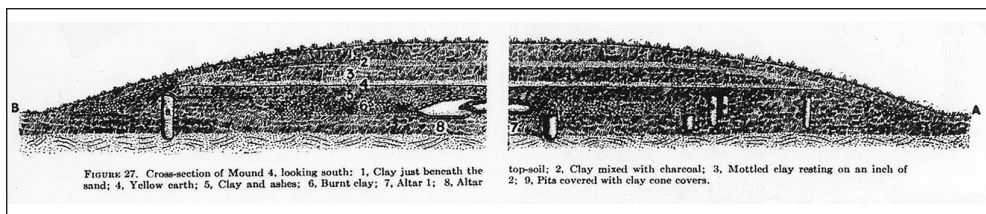


Figure 7
(Rusnak)
Peabody Museum
picture of effigy.

Photograph of the Turner Mound effigy from the Museum Catalog. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 82-35-10/29685.



Figures 8 and 9 (Rusnak) Survey drawings of the Turner group of earthworks.



Figures 10 and 11
(Rusnak)
Profile and floor
plan of Mound
No. 4 as shown
in Willoughby's
1922 report.

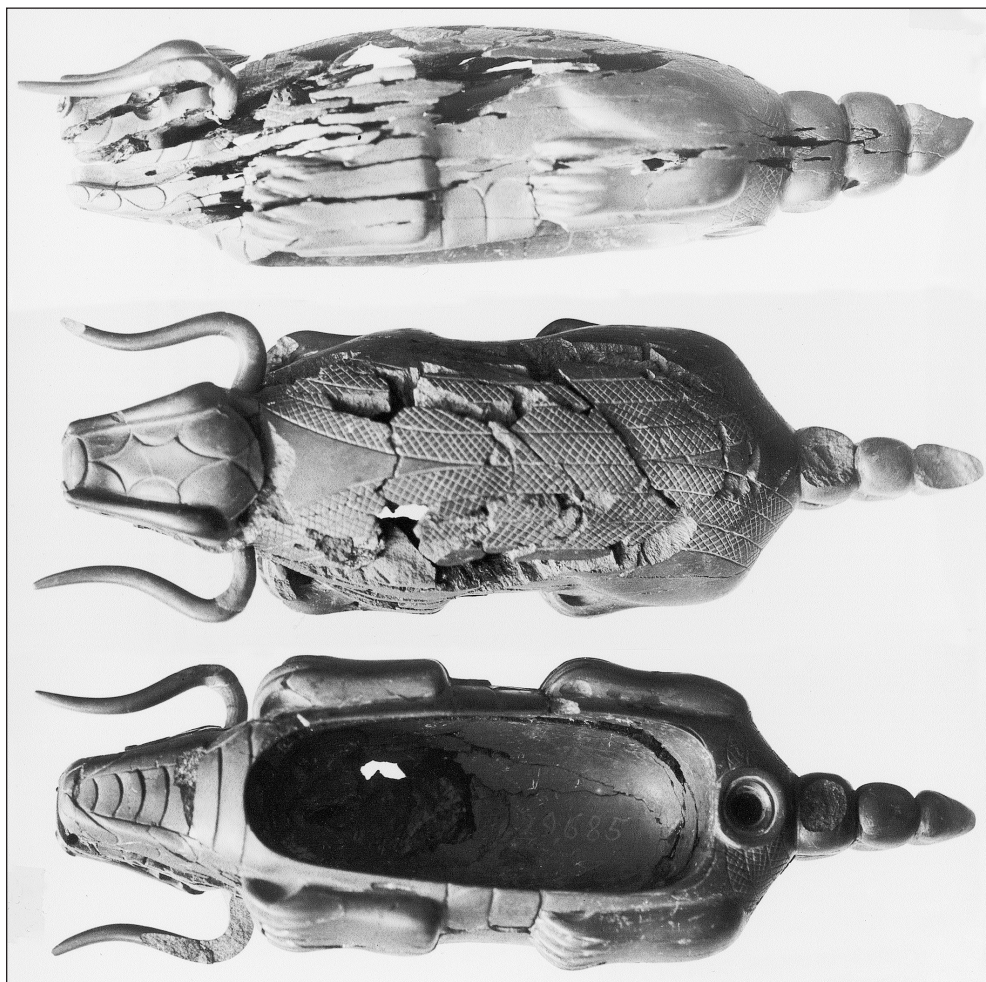


Figure 12
(Rusnak)
Glass plate image
of effigy which was
assembled from fragments.
Image was made between
1882 and 1905 according
to Museum notes. Courtesy
of the Peabody Museum
of Archaeology and
Ethnology, Harvard
University 82-35-10/29685.
(Glass plate number
2004.24.2478).

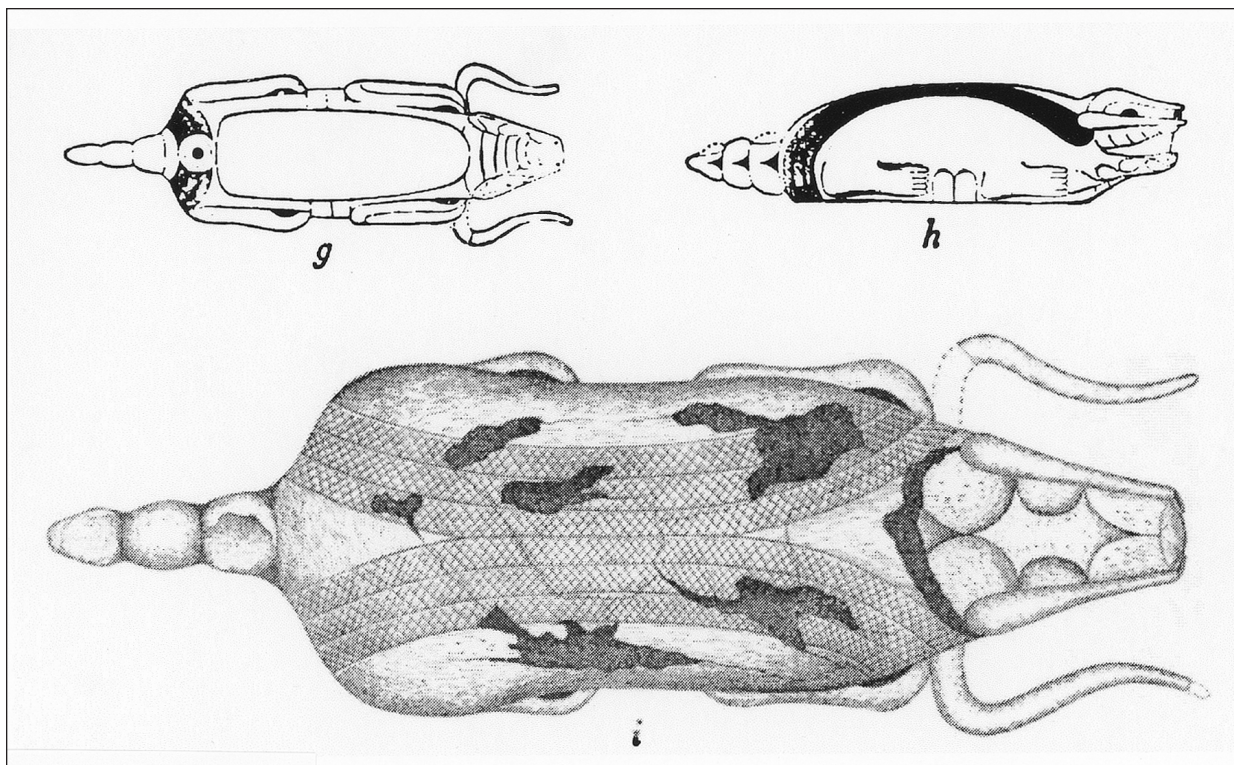


Figure 13 (Rusnak)

Drawing from Willoughby, 1916— shows restored areas of the horned monster.

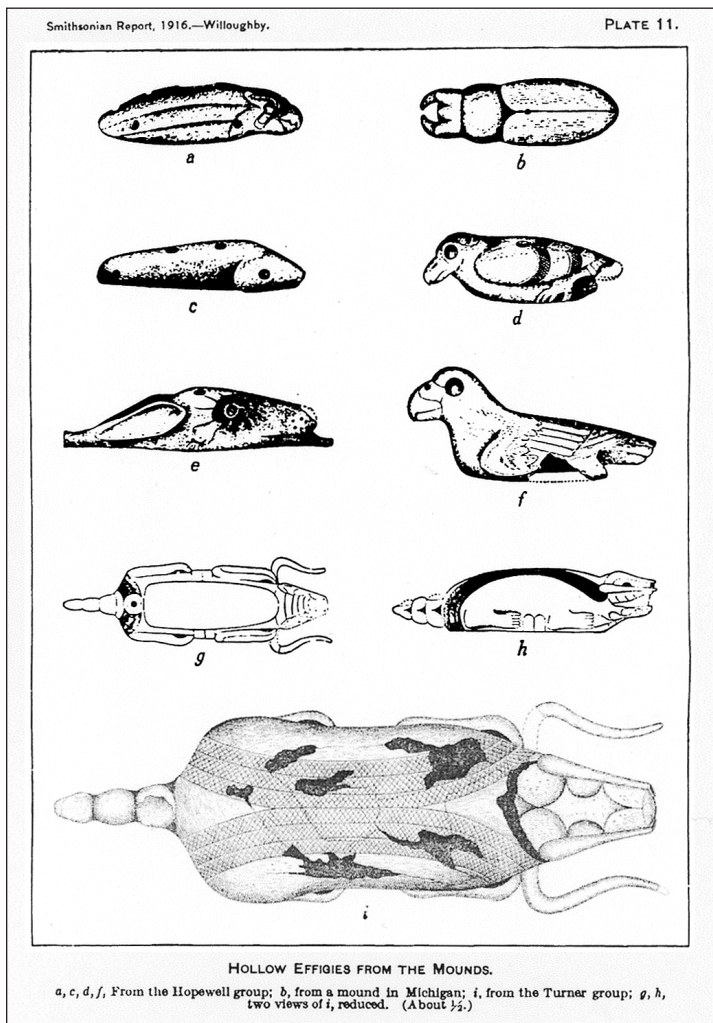
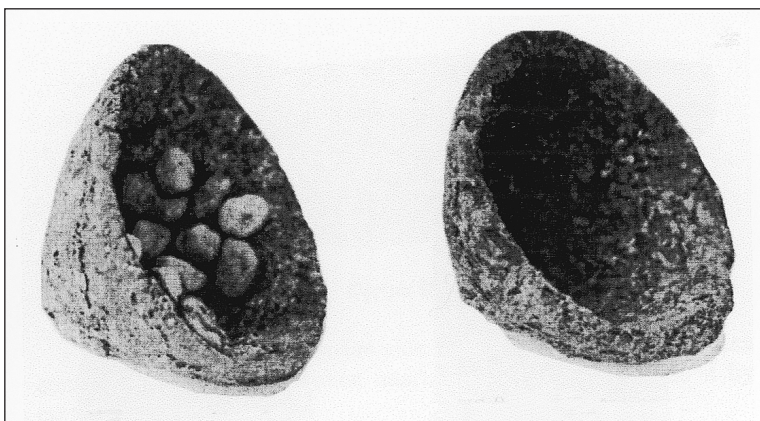
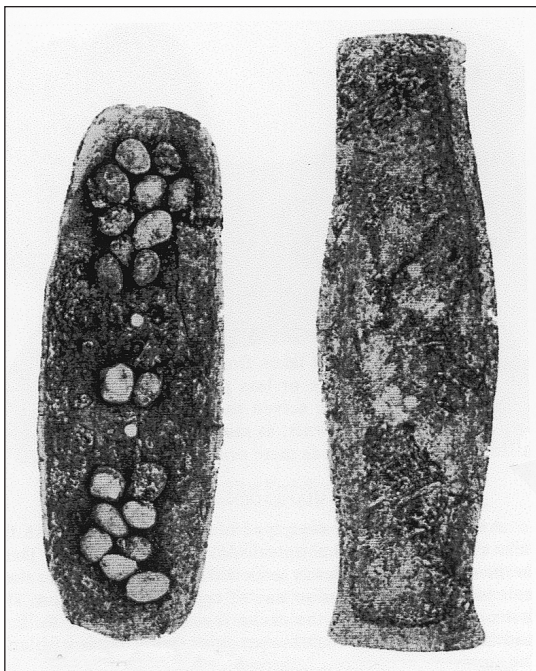


Figure 14 (Rusnak)

Drawing from Willoughby's 1916 article "Ancient Art of Ohio" where he refers to such artifacts as "hollow body effigies." He also suggested connection with Horned Serpents of Mexico.



Figures 15 thru 17 (Rusnak) Copper boatstones from Turner.

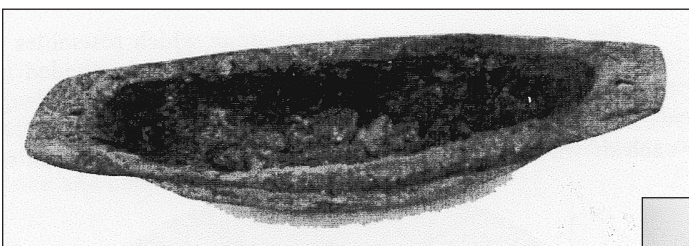


Figure 18
(Rusnak)
Sketch of horned serpent
as shown in Lankford

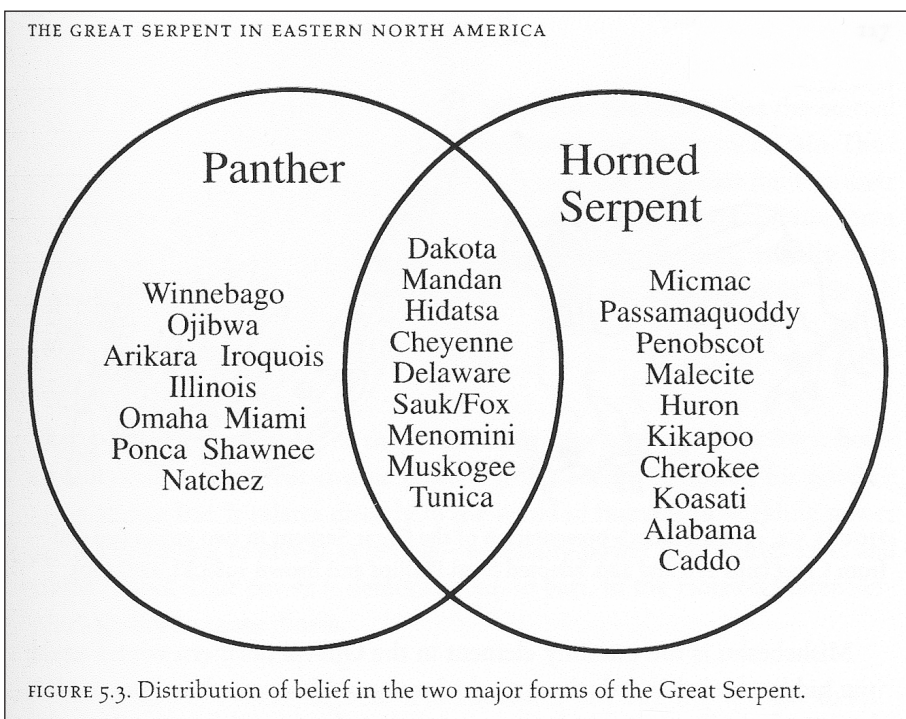
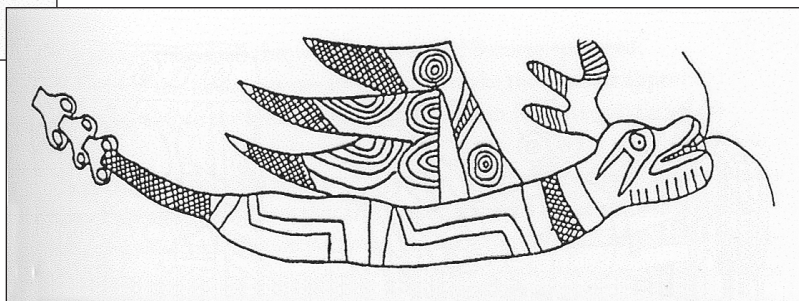


Figure 19
(Rusnak)
Lankford's graphic of cultures whose
traditions include a belief in two major
forms of the Great Serpent. Courtesy
of the University of Texas Press.